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(U) A New Source of Intercept in the Korean War - HISTORY TODAY: February 25, 2019

FROM: (U) Center for Cryptologic History (CCH)

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(U) The Truman Administration sought to prevent the war on the Korean Peninsula from spreading to other Asian areas or escalating into World War III with the Soviets. In early 1951, however, communications intelligence (COMINT) provided direct evidence that Soviet pilots were now engaged in aerial combat with U.S. aircraft over the Korean Peninsula.

(U) The Air Force Security Service (AFSS) had been providing intercept support since the Korean War began in June 1950. The AFSS had been formed in 1947, as the Air Force became a separate military service. Intercept units were based on Radio Squadrons Mobile, units of the Army Security Agency that had supported American air operations in World War II. Much of AFSS's early work in Korea had been against enemy manual Morse command-and-control communications.

(U) The AFSS got into voice intercept in Korea in February 1951, against a Soviet air operations network. The effort started small but built up over the course of the next year, as the intercept showed itself to be increasingly important. On March 22, 1951, USN-39 in Japan collected Russian-language radio telephone calls vectoring 12 fighter aircraft to intercept 20 U.S. fighters and bombers. The AFSS operators recognized that the radio procedures were the same as those observed in the Vladivostok area, the Baltic, and East Germany.

(U) In early March 1951, the U.S. Air Force director of intelligence made it his highest priority to determine the nationality of pilots flying Soviet-type aircraft in Korea. Before the end of the month, the First Radio Squadron Mobile (1RSM) was able to confirm to Far East Air Force (FEAF) and HEADQUARTERS AFSS that some pilots of jet aircraft engaged in air defense operations were speaking Russian. The Truman administration strove to see that this intelligence information was kept close-hold, lest it spark demands that the war be widened.

(U) This development led to a new and extremely valuable source of intelligence information to support air operations in Korea.

(U) The response to the director of intelligence's priority request led to increased COMINT collection against Ground Controlled Intercept (GCI) communications — transmissions from airfield control towers — on the communist side. Air intelligence analysts had long known from experience in other regions that communist pilots made few decisions on their own and that their actions were closely tied to their tower controllers.

(U) The requirement for a voice collection effort sparked a request to establish a WWII-style "Y" service.* After study, the FEAF commander, General Stratmeyer, sent a request to the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Hoyt Vandenberg, for sixteen Russian intercept operators and analysts; they got one officer and eight enlisted men. This group became known as Team I.

(U) Team I located itself with an Air Force squadron on a hill four miles northeast of Kimpo Air Field, near the South Korean capital of Seoul. It intercepted communist GCI communications and had them transmitted to American pilots operating over North Korea, using a radar unit as cover for the source. Team I intercept was telephoned to a radar controller in an adjoining tent, converted to radar-derived terminology, and relayed to pilots using word-substitution codes. This information was quite valuable to the pilots in anticipating their enemy's moves, but if a pilot were shot down and captured, as far as he knew, the intelligence came from radar.

(U) After the Team I concept proved out, Fifth Air Force (5th AF) on May 22, 1951, proposed that another RSM team be positioned on Pongyang-do (PY-do) to intercept Korean, Chinese, and Russian voice transmissions from the

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Sinanju area. PY-do had security problems, though: it was an island in the Yellow Sea within six miles of enemy territory and was accessible only at low tide. When 5th AF agreed to provide evacuation support, Team II was placed on PY-do on August 6; it was withdrawn on September 18 when reception improved at the Kimpo site.

(U) The concept worked. For example, Team I on April 29, 1951, acquired messages that indicated U.S. planes from the 4th Fighter Squadron, flying in northwest Korea, were being boxed by MiGs. This information was sent to the pilots, who maneuvered out of the area.

(U) The central U.S. cryptologic organization, the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA), NSA's predecessor, also provided support to the field in exploiting enemy GCI. In December 1951, AFSA established a combined linguistic-analyst group comprising personnel from AFSA-24 (Russian Processing division) and AFSA-23 (Chinese Communist Air section).

(U) Later, intercept teams were deployed to the small island of Cho-do, closer to North Korea but under U.S. control. The intercept site worked with a rescue station for downed pilots. See [18 December 2017 History Today article](#).

(U) This intercept became a valued support tool for air operations. If technical problems prevented this kind of intercept on any particular day, Air Force leadership would not conduct operations over North Korea (and would invent some excuse such as maintenance problems as a cover story).

*(U) This is a British term sometimes adopted by Americans. The Y service was tactical intercept, and the term derives from a cover term used by the British in WWII.

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(U) *The author of this article is David Hatch.*

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